

FRANKLIN NEAL



SIX
YEARS
BLACK

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Six Years Black

Franklin Neal

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Syble's Present:

Part 1

We didn't always live in the big city. It's nice but I'd rather spend my time in the past- when memories were real. My imagination so full, I gave birth to new life. Imaginary friends and more. The grass was definitely greener. But it's scary now. Unbearable in fact.

"Syble. Get up, your teacher is arriving soon. Get yourself ready and eat breakfast." Her deafening voice is part of the routine. I hear the door slam. Huh, where are my glasses? I reach around for it. "Gotcha." I put my glasses on. Right now it should be twelve minutes until the widow Bitho comes. Just like her name. She smells and sounds old. I put on clothes and head to the kitchen.

"Mom describe to me what you're wearing." Where is she? "Mom. Mom. Mommy." I finally hear her high heels clicking. I didn't realize she had left the kitchen.

"What's the matter honey, you barely touched your cereal." The greasy sound of the cupboard closing irritates my ears. I memorize each action she takes. Right now I can tell she's opening the bottom cabinet. And cue the sound of gushing water from the sink.

"Syble, do you want a bagel? We have cream but you have to smear it yourself." The toaster is across from the refrigerator on my right.

Why did she not walk towards the toaster? "Mom, my bagel needs to be toasted."

"Oh, Syble I'm sorry I moved it last night. I was cleaning the counters." I hear the toaster, a bagel pops out forty seconds later. "Do you need help off the high chair?" she asks, then pauses. "Okay, by that expression I'll back off," she says. I want to know the look I give her. I can tell Mom begins to move faster with each step she takes like a swift woodpecker. I bet she has on her purple heels.

"Good morning Ms. Green." Did everyone decide to wear heels today? I wonder what my slippers really look like. Mom says it's a bunny and that it has a big red nose. I do feel a round puffy ball at the tip.

“Good morning, Syble.” I wonder if the widow Bitho thinks I am stupid because I still wear glasses. My glasses are a tether to the past. When memories were real. I hold on to my glasses because they are the only thing that I know that hasn’t changed over time.

“Good evening,” I tease her. I bet she is angry. I bet her face is scrounging up right now. “Let’s begin,” she says. The widow Bitho takes the lead and I follow. “Syble,” she says. “It has come to my attention that you have bagel crumbs around your mouth.” Why did she say all that? Wipe your mouth or something shorter would have sufficed.

“Uhh.” I use my hands like napkins and wipe my mouth. “Is it gone?” I ask.

Since I am closed off to the world in a unique way, I wonder what chair my teacher will choose. She took off her shoes so I cannot hear her footsteps as easily. That myth about our hearing being heightened is completely farfetched. “Syble, pay attention.”

I can tell you one thing about the room. There is an annoying clock. I hear it’s incessant ticking for the next hour.

“Can we take a break?” I ask politely.

“No. You will finish learning your combination.” So we continue. Braille alphabet is nothing like learning the English alphabet.

I take off my glasses. I hear a zipper getting unzipped. “Zzzzzzpt.” It has to be a long bag because the zipper kept going, like trains on a track. The widow Bitho is rummaging through whatever bag that’s on the ground. “Window Bitho.” She stops rummaging, like a raccoon spotted in the trash. Every so often I make it my job to say her name incorrectly.

A distinct noise makes my heart plummet as it slams on the table. A hardcover textbook specifically designed for the visually impaired.

Learning Braille alphabet is like crafting a new language. Let me be honest it’s not easy, I’d rather just quit. The year of my accident Mom pushed for me to learn Braille right away but I just couldn’t. My life was filled with many more cons than pros.

Braille is a tactile reading and writing system, using raised dots to represent letters of the print alphabet. “You see how the V feels?” widow Bitho says. It’s

taking a lot for me not to laugh after she says that. I think she notices me chuckling because she stops instructing me. I hear fleeting laughter from her. Then she coughs, correcting her behavior. She might have a sense of humor after all.

The widow Bitho usually stays for couple hours then leaves. I cannot wait till Mom comes home. She's bringing Chinese food with her. She knows I love Chinese. The remainder of the day is a blur till dinnertime.

"Pass me the chow mein box, Syble." I glide my hand along the table. I hear and feel the Chinese bags ruffling like opening chips.

"To the right or..." I say.

Mom does not help me out. "What happened to the girl who used to find her way home?" I dislike when she tells me that. When she brings up words that are etched within my heart because of him.

The conversation at the table becomes heavy. "Syble, I'm nervous about that important case coming up. If I win he is behind bars but if I lose another killer, rapist, just an evil man is on the loose all because of a flawed justice system."

"I know, Mom. You will win, don't get worked up about it." I twirl the chow mein so much that my fork grew golden hair. I hope she wins.

Truth is Pops used to show me survival skills before we moved to the big city. He taught me how to pick the right berries, know which plants are safe to eat, and above all how to track anything that helps me find my way home. "Mom, can you hand me the sweet and sour sauce." I reach for sauce packets. With food in my mouth, I open the first packet.

"Wait, sweetie that's hot sauce!" I'm more upset that I added three packets before she said anything.

"Mom! You know I like sweet and sour," I pout. Mom snorts like a pig when she laughs.

"Sorry Syble, I was curious to know if hot sauce tastes good with our noodles. Oh Syble cheer up. I didn't give you any hot sauce. I handed you the right packets." She truly is evil. "That's a knee slapper," she says while slapping her knee. She snorts some more. I cannot help but smile. I have the most

compassionate mom around.

After our heavy meal mom turns on the television until the day surrenders itself for night to take over.

“Goodnight,” I say. She says goodnight back to me. Her footsteps are mute while walking on the carpet. “Mom, Mom, Mom!” The door squeaks halts. “Is the night light on?” I wait a second hear her response. I breathe out. “I know, I know, I’ll get a new joke.” She doesn’t answer right away. “Mom, you still there?” She responds with a mh-hmm. I hear the lights flick. “Thanks Mom.”

“Hold on, was flipping the switch up to turn your night light on, or was it down?” she says through the creaks of the door. “That’s just mean, Mom!”

I love how we can tease one another. We went through a bleak moment. Some of our jokes may appear dark. Pun is heavily intended.

I lie in the dark for a while. I assume it’s dark. It’s been Mom and me for years. I would have learned Braille sooner but I couldn’t concentrate. There were way too much struggles to cope with before I could put time into studying.

My blanket feels like a hot towel pressed on my body. My pillow smells nice. When did she find the time to wash my cover? I lie on my stomach. I always look forward to dreaming.

I may be alive but why do I feel like I’m just floating? I turn to my side, my sleep position. I like to bend both my knees on top of each other and place my arm in the middle like a sandwich. I tilt my head and I feel that his glasses are still on me. I take them off. Dad? I miss you so much. I grip my pillow with a loving hug.

“How’d you sleep, Syble?” Mom asks.

“Well actually, I feel rested.” My bed shakes when she bumps into it. I try to remember her smile, it was the brightest smile I had ever seen.

“Get up and we can have breakfast,” Mom says.

“Can you get me orange juice since you’re opening the fridge?” The fridge makes a soft swoosh when it opens then clicks. Mom leaves the kitchen. I hear the TV on. She starts flicking through the channels. “Mom this is not pulp free.

Why do you hate your blind child?!” She shows no attention to me. I pinch a small chunk of pulp from my tongue. “Mom, do you think you can win this case? Also you mention you received threatening emails right?” I hear her flick through the channels five more times.

“I have to, what if another girl...I just have to win. I get those all the time remember. I can handle it.” she says over the television. She must be carrying a weighted vest around with all that stress wrap around her voice. “Let’s not worry too much about that. I have a week until then.”

“Hey, Mom what are you wearing today?” I sit on the couch next to her. I like to imagine that she’s more than something that produces sounds.

“Remember those red flowers you and Dad picked for me at our old house?” I nod. “That’s kinda like my top. The flower petals are on my right shoulder and the stem comes to my chest. I have on a plain gray skirt. I just hope it doesn’t make me look fat.”

“Mom, you are a stunning woman. Your eyes sparkle brown. Mom, you are a goddess.”

“And how would you know that missy?” She teases me.

“Well, you tell me I’m pretty. And you’re my mother so I know you’re gorgeous.”

“Hey Mom, did you add anything new to the house?” That’s how I figure out my surroundings.

“No Syble, you know I would have told you. Hey Syble, I know by next year you will be eighteen but you don’t have to worry about life as an adult until you feel comfortable, you are still my little girl.” Sometimes I miss the simple things like telling day from night. In my world it’s an eternity without sunlight. My life is like those dreams when I’m falling and can’t wake up. That’s how every day feels.

I live vicariously through my mom.

Syble's Present:

Part 2

I cannot be afraid all the time. I believe people cannot have true sympathy unless they experience the same pain. The words sputter out of their mouths: I cannot imagine or the poor child. I know they mean well but deep down, others cannot understand my torment. Hang in there kiddo. The glass is half full. That's just people spouting nonsense. Be optimistic! Hmm, Now they are just toying with my reality.

The wind tickles the hair on my arm. Mom waits in the car for me. I go inside the store. To my right, if I walk a little past the entrance are flowers.

"Anything else?" the sales clerk asks. I suspect he's probably digging for gold since I cannot see what he is doing. Not sure why but I assume everyone picks their nose around me. I hand him the exact change. Judging from his voice cracking, I think he is in high school or maybe a bit younger "Here, the bag is in front of you. I think it's cool that you cannot see," he says handing me my flowers. Rude...that's my first impression. "This world filled with so much hate, segregation, anguish the list goes on like a Japanese scroll. Sorry, I meant to say, maybe it's okay not to be able to see everything. The world is your oyster. I say that because I can imagine you see yourself sinking into the depths of the ocean. But look at it this way. You're not alone. I know pain, believe me, I know it well. We can get through a lot if we surround ourselves with wonderful people."

I hold the bag of flowers, listening to him before I walk out. He continues. "I almost laugh it's like we all know hurt, rather mental or physical but yet. Yet, we still want to inflict it upon one another. Sorry, I'll stop talking." I turn and walk to the exit. "By the way, those flowers are elegant just as you are." He has a cute voice, he has to be older than I thought before.

"Thank you," I say through the cracks of my smile. My heart is beating fast. What did I say thank you for? Yeah, he compliments me but is there something else? I head outside the store. "Syble! Over here" I head the direction of my mom's voice. "You are glowing, hon. Blushing in fact, is it that boy?"

"Mom, I think...I think" I feel her warm palms on my arm. It feels like a prairie of daisies blooming.

“What is it Syble?”

I turn to face her. “I don’t think I need to go visit Dad.” My head jerks forward almost enough to pop an airbag. “Mom what’s wrong? Why the sudden stop?”

I turn to face her. She continues on. “You never said that before but I understand,” Mom says, her voice almost empty. “But can we visit him for today, after all, we still have those flowers you just bought.” I feel silly, I did not even put myself in Mom’s shoes, I did not consider her feelings. It’s not just me who wants to visit Dad. I’m not sure but for the first time I feel like I’m accepting my blindness. I tell Mom every day that I never blamed her after the car collision, of course I’m more than upset that my dad passed away but I’m forever grateful to still be able to touch her. Equally as important, I can hear her angelic voice.

On Sunday, as was tradition, Mom and I visited my father’s gravesite.

I stand beside my mom with one hand on his gravestone. “Syble, I don’t know how you do it. You are incredibly strong. I adore that about you and like a sponge, you absorbed good traits from your father.” I would try to face her and make eye contact figuratively speaking. But her voice, it’s so damp, like she is talking through her tears. “Syble, did your dad ever tell you how we met?” She chuckles with welcoming happiness. Her coat flops hard; the wind stirs for a moment then calms.

“No, he never did.” My voice is trailing off, waiting for a story from her. I hear a bird above.

“Well, it’s one for the books. Remind me later, I’d love to tell you. What’s up with this black feather?” I hear her bend over. “A raven?” She says confusingly.

In the past when it was still crisp within me, I couldn’t cope with losing Dad. Sometimes I will find my way up here without Mom during the week when I really need to talk. Mom is walking to the car. I turn around and run after her footsteps, crunching like potato chips. Her callus free hands touch my shoulder and her wet lips press against my forehead. “What are we doing later” I ask her.

“I’ll tell you when we get home,” she responds.

“Mom do I have anything close to tan that I can wear? That is clean.”

“Yes, you do.” I cannot hear her walking on my carpet. “Here, try this on.” I

assume the dress or blouse is dangling in my face. I want to ask her if the top is cute since we are going somewhere a bit formal.

The fabric is soft when I reach for it. I sit up on the bed. “Where are we going to eat, Mom?” I toss the top over my head. She grunts, trying to pick up something. “I hope that is my white belt?” The metal jingles slightly. She coils the belt around my arm.

“I’m thinking about trying this new place a friend recommended.” Mom doesn’t have many friends so I’m curious to know who this person is. I tie my shoes and head outside.

“Watch the last step.” I hang on tight, the step rails are like holding Jesus’s hands, who would let go? I step down safely, my best friends are flat surfaces. “Mom, these shoes feel tight. Uhh. I should have paid more attention.” The car chirps then unlocks as we head toward it. It’s some dark blue SUV. I remember the day I picked it up with her. She asked me what color, give me three options and we agreed on dark blue. “Oh honey you look nice.”

I’m more upset with this cane in my hand. She opens my passenger door. “Mom I can take care of myself, you don’t have to open my door every time.” I feel like a cliché. Honestly, that’s why I had my mom put blue tape around my cane. I cannot fight all the factors of becoming a full fledged sightless individual. There is no importance of the tape, I simply wish to be different. Mom’s car door shuts, then the engine starts.

I don’t care much about cars. They all look the same to me. It’s okay to laugh, that was meant to be a joke. Cars definitely do not sound the same. I wish that I could sit here and tell you I can distinguish each car model by its sound, again, that myth is not real. Those kung fu movies make me look bad. Only thing heightened is my ability to relentlessly talk Mom’s ears off.

Even so, I adore the idea of cars and traffic. Being visually impaired is learning a new language. So what do you think of getting in the front seat of a car for the first time? I’m only recollecting from past memories, however, I love knowing that no matter what language you speak you can participate in the glorious dance that is driving. The traffic lights keep the beats consistent. Everyone knows the basic footsteps, stay to the right, stop then go, we learn not to step on each other’s toes. Then the venue changes at night, driving through a

city with glamorous lights, it's chokingly mesmerizing.

Right now I can tell we are on Gale Avenue because the stop sign that is at the end of our block causes Mom to stop. "Mom who is this friend of yours? What's wrong, why did you honk?" The car doesn't move for a while. Then it smoothly starts rolling again. "Mom." I start reaching for her ears. Of course she has a Bluetooth earpiece in. "One second Syble this is someone from work they left me a voicemail. Oh honey stop pouting." Am I pouting? I was going for an angry look, I adjust my arms accordingly. "Now you just look like you have to pee," she says while snorting.

"And now Mom, you're a talking salt shaker." I picture Mom as random items to make her upset. No matter how small or childish I try to find some ways to cope with being blind. Mom smacks her tongue.

"Oh Syble you couldn't imagine me as an apple at least? Just like our last name, I prefer green apples."

I open up the mirror that's above the car. I imagine myself six years older. More freckles engulfing my face. The weather is pleasant.

"Mom, this friend, it's not a lady friend, is it?" I hear her trying to swallow a football-sized gulp.

"I met him a while ago. And we have been taking things slow." She squeals like a teenager. "I would have told you earlier but I wasn't sure about how you would take it. I know you don't like being kept in the dark. So to speak. Not even a chuckle, I thought that was a good one!" I end up laughing.

I sigh. "I know what you mean." I reach for her hand; it's usually where the gear shift is. Her fingers twitch. I can tell she wasn't expecting my touch. "It been six long years. I want you to be happy." I feel her thumb wrap around my fingers.

"Are we at the restaurant? It seems like we've been driving for three days." The car door swings open.

"I need to fuel up," she says. I pounce from my seat not expecting her to slam the door. I dislike being by myself. I normally say hate but Mom annoyingly always corrects me- 'hate is a powerful word' blah blah blah. I fondle the car buttons trying to turn on the radio. "Ahh, why is it so loud!" Mom's Patti Labelle

CD is in. She is old school, Soul Train, The Jackson 5 and so on.

The car door chirps and the latch clicks opens. “Mom?” I call out. I don’t hear her voice. “Stop trying to scare me!” Until I hear a familiar voice or at least a voice, I am restless. She begins to talk because she knows that terrifies the living mess out of me. “Okay honey, the restaurant is not too far off. You ready?” I nod.

“Why are we not moving?” I ask. Her necklace gives me chilly goose bumps against my skin. Then she comes back strapping my seatbelt in. “Oh yeah sorry, I forgot I took it off.”

I start to poke at her cheek. “Just for trying to scare me, Mom. I’m going to embarrass you.” I start rubbing my hands together like a sinister villain. “Muahaha.”

I count roughly three car horns while driving, including Mom’s from earlier. “I never did ask. What’s the place called?” I did not recognize the high pitch in my own voice.

“Gordon Mayu. It’s real fancy.”

The car slows down and then makes a sharp right. “Why are we going in circles?” I assume.

“Finding a closer parking space.” Mom puts the car in reverse. Then I hear the engine go off. “Please be on your best behavior.”

I fling the car door open. Oops. I’m lucky it didn’t hit another vehicle. I prefer when Mom guides me and dare to abandon my cane.

She grunts at the action but doesn’t object. “Do you want your glasses, Syble?”

I nod and hear her rustling. As I exit the car, the exterior roasts my palms. I cool my fingers against my belt and pace next to the SUV.

“Here” I feel the familiar frames touch my nose and slide over my ears.

“Thank you. I cannot believe I almost left them behind.” The glasses are the missing piece to my puzzle.

“Why didn’t you grab your cane?” I don’t answer her. She taps my shoulder.

“Mom, I’m trying to make a good impression. I only use that when I’m

walking by myself.” Her bony cheeks squishes against my own cheek.

“I already told him about your condition. Jordan doesn’t judge, hon.”

I can already tell this place is fancy. I hear the subtle sound of flowing water the minute I step in. Oh the smell, my mouth instantly salivates like a hungry hyena. I elbow my mom

“Sooo...” She pauses. “Okay, let’s start with the table. The tablecloths are red and the chairs are blue cushion. Aww, Syble there is an aquarium in the far back. Imagine diving to in the ocean and swimming with all the vibrant creatures of the sea. The floor’s like walking on the cool lava. Oh it’s just splendid. Strange.” I feel her body move.

“What’s strange, Mom?” My arm hair is standing up. Great air-conditioning I think to myself. “I thought this place might have had chandeliers.” She laughs. “Oh and we may be a tad bit underdressed. Sorry about that.” Foreign footsteps approach us. “My name is Juan and I will serve you this afternoon.” His name fits his accent.

“I like an exit near the seat,” Mom says. I couldn’t help but laugh. “Excuse me that’s humiliating.” Mom says out loud “I like a seat near the exit. And three will be dining.”

We sit down. “Mom, what’s the point of having a pet fish. Like you cannot even pet them. It’s called a pet for logic’s sake. Fish lack a basic pet obligation which is a warm hug.” She just ‘mhms’ as a response. I’m not sure why but I begin to panic. I feel silly like I could be wearing a big bunny costume.

The silverware rustles from Mom’s sudden burst of excitement. “There he is, behind you,” she says. I turn around. “Slightly to your left honey. That’s Jordan Carmichael.”

I swivel my head back to her. “He is really handsome. I see why you like him,” I say seriously. “You’re such a kid, Mom.” She splashes water on my nose. “What if he spied that you did that?”

“Hi,” Jordan says with a deep voice. I put my hand out for a firm handshake. He must use lots of lotion; his hands are baby soft. “I’m Jordan Carmichael, and you must be Syble Green. A pleasure to finally meet you, your mother always

says great things about you.”

First of all, why does he say my whole government name as such? “Hello, I’m Syble nice to meet you.” His cologne attacks my sense of smell. It’s a sweet citrus smell, maybe grapefruit.

“Hello, Anivia,” he says to my mother. I wonder if he gave her a handshake or a hug. Did an alluring smell of cologne and perfume clash with embrace? Or, did it whiff by?

“What are you guys eating today?” he asks eagerly.

“We haven’t gotten a chance to glance at the menu,” Mom answers. Foreign steps approach, muffled and surprising. I almost check my ears for headphones. “What can I get you folks to drink today?” Our server is a girl, but her tone is one of wisdom. Mom starts to rub my fingers. She twists and plays with my ring.

“Just a little longer,” my mom tells her. “Syble honey, the lobster and shrimp look good. There is also shrimp skewered laced in garlic. Fish, oh I see steak as well, anything striking your attention?”

My mouth is watering. “Everything you just named.”

“I think I might try some lobster, or salad” Jordan says. “So Syble what are you thinking of getting?” I reach for my water.

“I’m not sure” The glass tips over. “oh crap!”

“It’s okay use this,” Mom says. The table napkin is soft like a puppy’s belly.

“Thanks.” I dab the table. “Is it gone?” I say softly. I flow around feeling for any other liquid. After I am done I ball up the wet napkin and set it to the side. “Sorry.” I hunch back, my cheeks warm.

“Oh, this is good!” I say proudly in my decision ordering the shrimp.

I hear some people ferociously eating almost like they are eating the plate whole. “Have you ever consider getting contacts?” Jordan asks. My head jerks to the left with a shrimp in my mouth. I couldn’t help but laugh. “I’m sorry, I thought I’d break the ice. I see you’re laughing, your mother truly does see the best in you. Sorry, I meant to say notice you, not see...” His tone dwindles from radiant to dull.

“Mom has used that one before. But that’s was funny. Impressive in fact, two points for Hufflepuff,” I say after spitting out the shrimp’s tail. I wait for his reaction.

“He hasn’t watched Harry Potter,” Mom says trying to tug the conversation along.

“Excuse me ladies.” The chair squeaks when he gets up. “I’m going to powder my nose,” Jordan says. I point my fork at him. “I like this guy. He is quirky,” I say to my mother.

Mom taps me on the shoulder. “I told him he better come prepared with jokes. What do you think honey?”

I take a huge sip of my pink lemonade. I stall like a general in a war room, making her wait for my decision. “Honestly Mom, I pictured a dinosaur talking to me.” I laugh and mimic a T-rex arm. Soooo...” Usually when I slur the words ‘so’ she gives me a description of whatever we are talking about. In this case Jordan.

“Um, he has dark brown hair,” she whispers. “His eyes are green like an emerald.”

I put my thumb down. “Boo, Mom. Try again.” I keep my thumb in the air.

“Okay, okay.” She leans in. “It’s like after it rains the trees and bushes sparkle with determination. He is mysterious, I lean in every time he speaks to unravel his story. Even though he sparkles with energy there are bags underneath showing he is a tenacious worker.” My thumb slowly goes from poor to mediocre and then finally, I point my thumbs up. I detect flat footsteps approaching our table. “Would you like more water madam?” A server asks.

“Yes please,” Mom responds. I hear the gentle sound of water flowing.

“Is Jordan chunky? He ordered a salad and a light meal so...” I hear her take a sip.

“He takes care of himself.” She says nonchalantly, “He is tall as a door frame, a little taller than Dad. Jordan is not boring, a word to describe him. Mhm, maybe adaptive. But let me tell you his hands are too womanly.” She laughs. “Try some of my food. This dish is phenomenal.”

Dinner is going well. I don't hate the guy so that's something. My mom says she doesn't have a type but I think she does. "Jordan Carmichael. What is your occupation?" I ask.

I'm getting a bit sad, I'm down to three shrimp on my plate. "I help my brother run a business." He clears his throat clean. "A side hustle," he adds. I hear him exert out an 'I'm stuffed' breath. He literally ate leaves. I never did understand salad, like can I pick up tree leaves and douse them with ranch dressing and viola.

"My turn to ask the next question," Jordan says. "What's your favorite hobby?" This is an easy one.

"I cherished hunting, tracking, just simply being around wildlife. But occasionally, I do enjoy playing a good game of baseball. You know hand eye coordination, I excel with those attributes." He chuckles a bit, though slightly nervous, like he wasn't sure if he is allowed to laugh. Mom begins to laugh out loud breaking the dam of Jordan's chuckles.

"Your mother is like a Rubik's Cube." Oh, believe me, I know. I think to myself.

"What does that mean, sir?" Mom says. I wipe my hands. I attempt to reach for my glass.

I have some tricks to make things work for me at a restaurant scene. However, it doesn't always work out. I just need to remember to reach for my glass slowly.

"He's not that bad, Mom," I say closing the car door. "He can talk, that's for sure."

Mom brushes my hair out of my face. "Yeah, he is a good man." I turn on the radio instead of Patti Labelle. Pressing my arm alongside the cool glass instantly makes me exhausted. "You sleepy Syble?" I yawn on cue. Does that answer your question?

Syble's Past:

Part 3

“Syble” Dad rubs his fingers on a tree. “The key to surviving if you should ever get lost. Syble listen.” Dad has knee-high black socks on. He looks goofy almost like those Boy or Girl Scouts leaders.

“Dad these flowers are soooooooooo cute.”

He rubs his head. “They are, aren’t they? That is a purple violet flower.” My dad is showing off his athletic capabilities and hurtles over a thick branch. “Syble come here.”

I run to him. “Yes,” I say. My eyes sparkle with delight. “It’s a white violet. Smell its sweet fragrance.” He takes a big whiff and I mimic him. “It smells like flowers, Daddy.” Not sure why but he laughs, so I do the same. I like to watch Daddy close. He is so charming.

“Here,” he says and sticks the flower behind my ear. I run around with my arms out like a plane.

It’s getting late. Father guides me through the wildlife of Mother Maine. “That way, right?”

He nods with fondness. “I want you to remember this. A compass may show your direction but your heart is the true guide. Follow that and you will always find your way home.”

I paint a mental picture of my surroundings. The sun is lit like a match. It makes the clouds in the sky glow with passionate tangerine. “Syble are you tired?” I nod. He bends down.

I climb on his back feeling like a mountain when he stands up. The trees are stunningly beautiful from this height. No wonder daddy’s always nice, his view blissful like the wind that’s blowing right now. I make sure the flower doesn’t fall off. I dig my head into his back and grip his shirt. He carries me home. “Lead the way Syble, where to?” I point in the direction where our house is.

“Heading home,” I say.

The hypnotic smell of grits and bacon rejuvenates me to. “Good morning.” Mom and Dad are sitting at the table. Mom drives from home to the city just about every day. “More bacon, Sam?” Dad gives her a silly look.

“More bacon for me too, Mommy.” I stick my paper plate out.

“How many strips do you want?” I wasn’t sure at first but then I stick my fingers out. “Are you sure you can eat all this?” Mom asks.

“Mhm-uh.” I reply looking at my meal. The eggs glisten like sunflowers with extra pepper in the middle.

“Anivia, do we have any more orange juice?” Mom smacks her head, I imagine steam coming out the side of her face. “Did you? Or were you too busy painting again?” she said angrily.

Sometimes I sit by Dad for hours as he paints. Most of his paintings are of trees, the environment or if an animal sits still long enough he can capture the majestic moment with a simple stroke. If I could jump in the painting I would do so with joy.

“What do you plan on doing on your vacation days, Anivia?” I play around after I eat. I have toys to play with but I prefer the outdoors.

“I was hoping to hang with my family. How does that sound, guys?” Like the world stops for a split second.

“Sounds good, Mommy!” They begin to talk a smidge past my attention span.

I go outside. I retrieve my kite from a bucket near the door.

A three-sixty view of life. I have no worries.

“Fly! Hehehe.” The kite goes up and up. It’s near impossible for my kite to get stuck on a tree. The grass is short like buzz cuts. “Syble.” Dad runs to me. I drop my kite and run after him and he picks me up. Tosses me up in the air then catches me. He sets me down and tickles me. “Mommy make him stop.” I blurt out through giggling. “Tehehe.” Through my pain of laughing so hard, I can see Mom smiling. It’s a bright smile, one that blinds me.

“I’m coming to save you, Syble.” I’m dying of laughter.

“Sam, sweetheart, why are you teaching her these skills. You know she’s only

eleven, right?” Dad bends down and touches those green mosses.

“Moss is probably the best known natural navigation around,” Dad says. “People often think moss is a sign of direction but allow me to expand your knowledge. In order for moss to grow it needs moisture.” I’m listening to Dad but my true focus is on trying to find a rock to stand on so I can be taller.

“Doesn’t moss point north or something?” Mom asks. Dad gets into character like we are his Girl Scouts and explains moss and different ways to find direction such as using algae.

“So basically find moss that is not near the ground to get a better idea?” Mom rephrases. We continue exploring.

“Give me your hands, Syble,” Dad says after he jumps down.

“Sam you know there’s a slope over here. Why did you jump?”

“To have fun,” he responds.

The way I see these two, Dad learns from the environment and Mom thrives through life by the books. “This way is much funner, Mom,” I tell her jumping down. I wanted to show her I’m big now, so I jump on my own.

“Nice,” Dad says, “stuck the landing too.” Dad high fives me.

I see two rabbits elegantly dashing by. “Do you guys not feel these bugs or do they like my plump blood best?” Mom swats around. She looks like one of those yellow waving tube guys.

There are thick bushes in our way, but Dad chops it down with his machete. “So then what happened?” Dad is telling us a story about college. When he used to live in the city. “So from that day on my roommates and I decided that we would only use four spoons, a fork, and one knife. One piece of silverware for each person.” He chuckles already laughing at his story. “We thought we were so clever. If you use your knife you have to clean it yourself. But one day we had a friend come over,” Dad says looking at Mom. “Anyway, she asked to use a spoon and we all froze not knowing what to do or who would want to give up their only spoon. Ah, good times. My early twenties what a time. We sure were not the brightest.” Mom laughs out loud.

Up ahead is a relaxing area to swim. “Where are we going?!” Mom hollers,

trailing behind us. She rarely comes out, she's a city gal that's for sure.

Mom's face glistens like stars reflecting of a stream. "Mom, did you notice how we followed the chirp of birds? Sometimes they can be a guide to fresh spring. Right Daddy?" Dad pats me on the head. "Tehe"

"Give the girl a badge for know it all." She playfully rolls her eyes. Mom may not be as fit as Dad but she is keeping up with us. "What else did Dad teach you?" I tell Mom how to navigate around.

"My favorite is using the trees." I start circling and touching a tree. "Mom, see if you look closely one side is bigger than the other. Knowing which side is bigger can give you a direction because it's the side that absorbs the most sunlight." Mom leisurely kicks a small rock that is on the ground. I witness her soul ascend out of her body when creepy bugs scatter. She has a strong distaste for bugs. "What about the stars and all that?" she says with discomfort after her soul resurrected.

"Sometimes we won't be able to see the stars, best to know every possible tactic." I feel like I earn three badges teaching Mommy.

"Honey are you going to join us." Dad's hair glows like a carrot that has been rinsed in water. "Sam you know black people don't swim. Matter of fact, you're shivering. One thing I don't like and that is cold. Uh-huh. Nope." She begins to trail off with her words. "I'm not getting in there..."

I splash dad in the face. He slices the water to come at me. I swim away as fast as I can. "Come here!" he says in a monstrous roar. "I'm going to eat you!" He catches me and wraps his arms around my stomach. "Ah!" He twirls both of us around. "Look" he whispers. "Your mom, that is my goddess over there."

Mom pulls out a book- not a surprise there. "Dad" He swims closer. I whisper a devious plan in his delicate ears.

"Mom will be mad if we do that," he says as he swims with no remorse toward mom to dry land. Behind Mom are trees spanning the sky. I love the pine trees that grow with a carelessness that allows them be rooted everywhere.

"Sam put me down! Sam." I laugh because Mom clubs Dad with her book like a desperate cavewoman. "Sam?"

I float in the chilly water like a lily pad looking at the sky. It is deliciously blue, I want to drink it like a blueberry Slurpee. One cloud looks like a frog. Another looks like food.

“Syble we are heading back,” Dad says.

“Are you sure she can find her way home by herself?” She looks around, “Sam, we wondered pretty far. Even I do not know my way around these parts.” Mom looks worried. “A compass may show your direction but your heart the true guide.

She will follow that and find us, find you,” Dad says.

Syble's Past:

Part 4

I throw a tantrum when she springs the news on us like a jack in the box, a complete surprise out of nowhere. “It’s for my job, Syble. Dad can you convince her for me. I’m going to be late again.”

Dad talks me down but I’m still crying. “But Daddy, I love it here.” He holds me with compassion, his feelings intertwine with my own. “I don’t want this either but it will be a new adventure for us.”

Three months living in Bandville, Maine.

“Hey, Daddy.” Dad parks the moving truck. He gets out the front seat. He pushes up his glasses that dangle at his nose. He is so handsome. “Grab this for me, Syble.” He grunts while holding up the truck heavy door. “We should be done by the time Mom gets back. “Is this glass of water for me?” I nod and smile.

Before moving to Bandville our neighbors were miles away, now I look to my left or right and they are suffocating. Across the streets are more neighbors. This is definitely new.

Dad takes out his favorite painting. I see a box that is sharpie Syble’s favorite. I remember packing my favorite toys and books. Incidentally, Dad should also be packed in it. He hangs up a painting of our house in the woods. He even details a split wood from the deadly ax. “It’s best not to unpack everything. Let’s wait for Mom and we can do that together. She is weird about things like that. For now, how about we walk around. Sound good?” Our new unique way to show endearment is not fist pumping or high fives but, instead, we use our elbows like high fives.

We go exploring our new woods. “At least we have this single tree in front of the place,” Dad sarcastically says. The tree is no taller than me and it looks like a dried up chicken leg after massacring the meat.

It’s usually like this- Mom working late hours as a lawyer. I came to an understanding that the city move is much easier for us. Plus we can see her more

since she won't have to stay in motels when she has a big events or important conferences.

We take a right. The street sign reads Gale Avenue. "Let's walk now, go, they're giving us the right of way." A car stops while making a left turn waiting for us. He's sporting a fancy black car. The right of way?

The weather is a snowman's worst fear. I see a white wedding dress through a window. "When did you and Mom get married?"

"You probably don't remember but you were there Syble. But it was a June wedding. Your mother and I adore that time of the year. After we got married I convinced her to move out of the city before her career became too hectic." Dad takes a whiff of the air. I press my skirt down. Then I tie my shoes. I start to get anxious, warm tingles because I mess up tying my shoes and had to redo it while Dad keeps on walking.

After I finally tie my shoes, I run behind dad and grab his palm. Both arms swing like a swing set.

There are so many people around. I cannot help but stare. "Watch out, Syble!" A stranger jogging almost knocks me over. It was a male runner. His cheeks shone through his dark jogging pants. "I can deal with bears or even foxes but people." Dad slaps his forehead. "Sheesh." I turn my attention to him. "People are different," he finishes. So many cars driving by. There is a red car, purple, bright orange, even white cars stand out.

I stop moving, making Dad jerk a bit. After his head stopped swiveling around the neighborhood, he finally connects the dots and sees what I'm looking at. "Ice cream it is. Let's cross the street," he tells me. Three cyclists ride on by. Here comes two more joggers. We cross the street. The joggers stop, they take out water bottles from their small pouches. Then pour it on their heads. I keep looking for some unknown reason. It is a refreshing new look.

"Hi, what can I get you?" Wow she is pretty.

"I want strawberry but I'm not sure if I want sprinkles or not!" Then my eyes go rogue on my favorite ice cream. I look through the glass with all the wonderful colors and tastes. I want to eat all of it. Dad asks for his half vanilla and half chocolate in a cup.

“Cash or card sir?” He reaches in his right pocket. Then he tries his back and left pockets.

“Dad, did you forget your wallet? I’m so furious with you right now.” I pout exiting the ice cream shop. Stepping outside reminds me of what a good a/c unit can do. I wait for Dad. He is taking a long time. I get impatient. I see these a couple looking at me. They both have their noses pierced. Her hair is red and his is dark, both hair spike like unicorn horns.

“Syble.” He finally comes out, I don’t bother to turn around. My hands immediately cross over each other with a rightly placed attitude. “Okay, I guess I will eat all this ice cream by myself.” He has to be lying, I stubbornly do not look back. “I did not forget my wallet. Here, I even added sprinkles for you.”

“Grand Hill Park.” We decide to sit on the bench and eat what’s left of our frozen dessert. “You always get the same thing, Dad,” I say with an accurately placed annoyed tone. “Try something new next time.” I see a dog walking a woman. She has no control over the situation. The dog smells the sweetness that engulfs Dad and me. The dog comes closer. Though he is large he looks harmless. “Is it a boy or girl?” Dad asks.

“A she,” the woman answers. The dog starts sniffing my hand. I’m shy for a bit so I back up.

“Is it okay if I pet her?” Dad asks for me. He pets the dog then mimic him.

I stay close to Dad and play around with the nice lady’s dog. “Samuel. The pleasure is mine. Yeah we are new out here.” I hear Dad say. The dog slobbers on my face. “This city was the better option for my wife’s career.” The woman’s dog starts barking at another dog in the distance.

Dad can spark up a conversation with anybody, he never stops amazing me. His presence echoes like thunder. We head home after a smooth day in the park.

The next morning Mom, Dad, and I take the first couple steps to unpacking our old life. “So what colors will look good, you guys?” Mom holds up a color wheel, she moves it from wall to wall foreseeing the future.

“Maybe like a turtle green.” I say. They immediately deny my suggestion. They take it a step further and wave my suggestion off.

“Baby blue?” Dad says. Mom makes her finger look like a camera, portraying the future color.

“Blue sounds nice.” I open another one of my boxes and stuff my room with clutter.

We are growing restless and stop for the day. “Who is up for a movie?” Dad suggests. “Maybe order pizza.” Both Mom’s and my hands are up like a bunch of eager students. Mom dials a number. “Does anyone want...pepperoni sounds good,” Mom says while dialing.

“Sausage too Mom! And that wasn’t even a question.” Dad laughs because he knows it’s true that’s why she paused the first time.

Dad and I are searching the remaining boxes for a movie. “Thank you. Pizza will be delivered in half an hour guys. So what movie are we watching tonight? Dad, what’s the movie about a boy wizard?”

The pizza is delicious, the crust is soft so I eat every bite. Halfway through the movie, I begin to feel fatigued. Mom lets me place my weary head on her shoulders. However, I prefer her lap, it’s much more comfortable. I lie down, my feet on dad’s lap and watch the movie. “Can I go to that school?” I say with much interest in the movie.

October of 2006

Mom found Dad an art exhibit that is happening this Saturday. She tells me it’s a surprise for him so I play along for couple of days. I know how artistic Dad is so he will appreciate the exhibit. The new move is not too shabby. I’m really starting to sink my teeth into this new taste, it’s not tasteless after all.

I hop in the back of Dad’s truck. He had this truck pretty much his whole life. I strap on my seat belt. The day is young but we have a long night ahead of us. “Anivia where are you taking me in such a hurry?” I begin to immediately fall asleep, their voices fading.

“Sam just trust me, okay. So silly of me, I cannot believe I lost track of time.” The car turns a corner while my eyes are shut. I can still hear them talking. “I was thinking I could cook us a nice meal when we get back,” Dad says.

Another turn is made. She speeds up. The car goes faster and faster. “Slow

down,” Dad says. Though sleeping, I can feel the car speed as we head straight for a while.

“Surprise,” we echo. His face lights up the minute we walk in the building. and he kisses Mom. I love the feeling, Dad smiling like a kid unwrapping his birthday present. “Aren’t you glad you dressed up like I told you to?” He’s looking sharp in his tan suit and tie. Mom is dazzling in her blue dress. I notice the colors, the lighting that hangs brightly.

The wall is plastered with unique painting and artwork. Like most art, I question the craft. I stay by Mom’s side and let Dad explore his playground.

“Syble, let’s go there, I want to get a closer look.” I follow behind like a puppy.

“Mom, they say art can tell a story. What’s this one’s story?” She analyzes the art.

“A man and a woman battling. The dad’s face flushes with temper, he is a hot head. But the mother, on the other hand, she is cool. But that does not mean calm. The main focus is the kid who’s crying. Maybe his life is a tornado, he’s living in the eye of the storm. The ladder the kid is holding could be a euphemism for freedom. Maybe he needs a way out.”

“Know it all.” And I laugh with her.

“Did you guys try out the appetizer? It’s scrumptious,” Dad says walking from behind us. “Aww thank you guys, this is a warm welcome. Come let me show you my favorite.” Now we both follow behind dad like baby ducks. Dad shows us each artwork that resonates.

I still don’t know what I am looking at, the painting is just dots. “...You feel the pain behind those dots. Each portray one of the seven deadly sins of mankind.” Dad’s chest puffs after his explanation. I find Mom giving me awkward eye contact. “That’s your father.” I rub my head, and selfishly laugh at my own inside joke. It’s ironic because she just went on rambling too. The painting that Mom described.

We head home with the street lights guiding us. I’m surprised that I don’t feel an ounce of tiredness. Mom’s driving and she stops Dad’s truck at a light. “Dad

you should have heard Mom. She was all like euphemism for freedom and other big words like focal point.”

He laughs and looks back. “Oh was she now.” Dad then looks to Mom.

“I told you, art’s contagious. Just one look and you want to spread how you feel.” The truck rolls over a sewer. “That was the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” Mom says.

Mom laughs, I do a pretend cough. “Yeah that was kinda dumb, Dad.”

We continue driving, the road is much smoother and I look out the truck, I didn’t notice half the area since I slept coming here. “You know something, Sam?” Mom says. “I love you. Just look at your daughter, Sam you’re masterpiece, your love is contagious.” I take off my seat belt. I scoot over to Dad. “Yeah, and I’m infected by it, too.” I hug him, “Tehehe”

“Syble you...” He was saying something but I didn’t hear him over the two vehicle horns.

“Syble, Syble! Yes this is an emergency. Yes ... a collision.”

“Mom,” I whisper.

“Syble?” she replies.

“Mom where am I?” My back is breezy. “Mom it hurts.”

My body aches as if rocks are constantly hurl at me. The cuts and bruises throbs like taking an extremely hot shower without any pause. My heart worries and helps feast into my loneliness. Even though I can hear Mom, it just feels scary being alone not being able to share what I’m going through.

She had Dad and me in the same room. “Mom it’s been a day now. Is he going to wake up?” I start to grip my hospital gown. My body feels like a vibrating chair. “Cause Mom, if he doesn’t wake up. I don’t know how I can.” She hugs me like an assassin. I didn’t know it was coming. Breathless.

“He will pull through.” I hold on to those words as if the Pope blessed me.

“Want any snacks, Syble?” I shake my head. “Syble you have to eat.” Her voice is gritting my ears like a chalk scratching on a chalkboard. It’s not on purpose but I don’t want to listen. “Syble.” I don’t answer.

She brings me something anyway. I take a bite. If only I could have seen her face. Maybe I wouldn't feel this way. My body still throbs with pain. After eating I begin to feel heavily exhausted. "Thank you, Mom," I say before passing out.

"Samuel." Who's voice is that? "Sam!" Is that Mom? I say waking up from resting. "...Green, step back! Samuel can you hear me! We are losing him" losing him? "Mom?" He's going into..." My attention goes to stampeding footsteps. "Saam!" losing him? Mom yells as if she gargling mouthwash. "Saaaaaem!" The machine keeps beeping with a consistent pace.

What's going on?!

"Mom!" I have been calling Mom's name for a while now. She is not aware of me.

Then I hear that flat noise. My mind cracks.

My life is like a landmine, each step I take is dangerous. Should I avoid one mine there another just waiting to terminate any small hope I have of being happy. Becoming blind wasn't the worst part of my life, no in fact that's almost laughable. Being blind, it doesn't even scratch the surface.

I remember clearly, though the day itself was uncertain. The pastor said his respects.

October 21st my beloved father passed.

Mom never did stop crying. It is not that I don't want to cry, but more like I entered a bleak nightmare and I do not want to wake up. It's chilly.

"They are descending Dad now." She composes herself long enough to tell me. My heart aches. I ball up my fist with my head dangling to the ground. The air is odorless. There is a slight drizzle from above. Each drop that touches my skin opens a new wound. I look up and open my eyes at that moment I feel the drops rolling down my cheeks. I want to scream.

This right here, this is the worst part. It's the grudging, painful truth when I wander up to the casket at his eulogy, I couldn't see him. This right here, this is making my heart bleed. "Dad?" I say to myself. Tears rain around me from Mom and family. The weather is frighteningly cold. There is so much woe that engulfs the day. Today is so bitter, it feels like I'm standing alone.

I hear Mom weeping through the dark nights. She blames herself for what

happened.

Mom and I are going through a rough phase in our lives. The truck collided on the passenger side where he was, Mom escaped with her life, glass shards were embedded in my eyes. I woke up two days after. While I was sleeping, my dad, he was fighting for his life. Waking up and not being able to see him, that...that was my eternal suffering.

I find myself sobbing all the way to Mom's room. Like automatic sensor the door open before I even knocked. We melted. "Mom? I feel like I'm alone. Some nights I wish...mom some nights I wish I didn't make it through the collision." Her smack echos to the heavens. "Don't you ever say that!" Said in perfect unison. Thunder boom from above.

At that moment, we craved for each other's warmth because we are exhausted from shivering with sadness. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry mom. I didn't mean to say that."

"Oh Syble. Don't cry." Like guilt thunder lingers over the house. It cracks the sky with petrification. "I miss him too Syble. Hey listen." Hard pebbles of rain. "We have to be strong. Like this thunder and heavy rain." Mom pauses, She hugs me tight "We will weather the storm." Mom pulls away "Otherwise your father won't stop crying." She hugs me even tighter. For that quick second, my face sparks a smile. Her hug, her heart, everything about her is electrifying. We are silent for a minute. "I'm sorry too dad?" The thunder subsides. By the time morning arrived we fell asleep in a bed of napkins.

Gone:

Part 5

The widow Bitho leaves after homeschooling. “Syble don’t forget to lock the door. Oh, and excellent job today.” She stops walking. “You have made tremendous progress.”

I’m more than capable of staying home alone. I have to be on my own someday.

Did Mom move the Easy Mac? Not this cupboard either. I ignore the Mac and cheese to check the fridge for milk. First I touch the top shelf for easy placement, then trace my fingers around. I can feel the smooth cold touch of eggs that fits nicely in my palm. Here it is. I pull the milk from the fridge. Frustrated, I make cereal because it’s simple. It’s quick and efficient, plus I don’t have to worry about burning anything. Chef Syble, I should whip up some eggs.

Sometimes I cannot imagine living on my own but as I grow older I will have to learn to cope with different struggles. I was taught on how to pour water for myself. I keep my finger at the top and whenever water makes contact I stop pouring.

The TV is on. I sit on the sofa and watch. Yeah right, more like listen. The show that is on right now is unknown to me. But they sure are using a lot of vulgar language.

The cereal is so crunchy I cannot hear my inner thoughts. I alternate between eating and sipping the milk like soup. The combination of sipping and eating has to be just right, otherwise, there will be no milk left for the cereal.

“Fuck no, Jack, if we go in there we might not come out alive!” The television blurts out.

Where is this character Jack going? Maybe a mafia building? A police precinct? Even better, is he the hero or villain? “If you have swollen glands or irritated rash please contact your doctor immediately. GlanX is not for the weak of heart or if your family suffers from...” Where is the remote? I cannot stand these commercials. Why would I take something with a side effect that can possibly do more harm? Damn, this cereal is scrumptious. Jack you son of a

bitch now you have me swearing.

In front of me is a small table. I put down my empty bowl. Then lie back down.

I feel around for the remote. All I feel are papers, and the ripped edges of envelopes. I knock over something. I crouch reaching around, feeling for it. An unwanted sensation soaks my big toe. I follow the mess upstream to find the culprit. Mom's glass. Geez mom. I just won't clean it. I leave the glass on the floor.

I take off my sock and sit back down giving up on locating the stupid remote. I'm a little upset now.

Mom said our couch is brown and fine just like your mama.

Finally, the commercials are over. I was beginning to wonder if these commercial knew how to terminate themselves. "Jack put down the sword!"

I take my dry sock off. If her cup is out maybe she still has a blanket lying on the couch. The leather is cool on my fingers, like figure skating. I begin to feel softness then I yank the small blanket. A unanimous amount of people will lie sideways facing the television. So, I lie how I usually do. I lie facing the TV.

There's not a day I don't pray to have sight, be normal. But there's not a second that passes that I don't want life to be back when I could peer through his eyes- they held truth, promise, compassion, anger, sadness. He laughed, he cried, he was sympathetic, he was fun, funny, silly, he was so silly. Above all, he was my father!

"Jack you almost stabbed me?!" I forgot the television was on. The man sounds angry. I'm beginning to think Jack is not this fella's ally. I lie down and listen to this random movie. I think about the epic gun fights. I arrive too late to completely understand what is transpiring. "If we go in. One of us will not make it. You ready brother?" Brother? Whoa, this just got interesting.

I begin to feel drowsy, exhausted. I doze off and turn away from the television. I take off his glasses. It takes me a while to fall asleep but strange enough napping is a heck of a lot quicker. I imagine nonsense like butterflies with blue wings. Maybe I'm a pilot.

“Syble.” his voice trails off. Now I’m hearing Dad. I roll over and pull the blanket to my chin.

“Dad?!”

At our old home, Dad and I explore. It was getting late and we were out in a heavy storm. I trusted him and followed behind. I slipped and he quickly ran and picked me up. The rain and wind are both heavyweights throwing all punches. His voice is soft. He pushes me to walk closer behind him. “You know what sounds good, warm soup.” The rain’s not attacking me as before. “Maybe soft toasted bread, Syble we can dip it in the piping hot soup.” We continue walking.

“Dad maybe add bacon bits?” I continue behind him. “Potatoes!” We both say at the same time. I laugh a second before him.

Dad and I finally made it home, drenched. I remember Dad picked up the phone. He is funny and lied, ‘no of course we were not out in the storm. We got back way before.’ He sticks his overly pink tongue out, I remember I laughed so hard. I taste the soup. “I think we did an excellent job with this soup.” He winks at me, “the bacon is an excellent choicessss...” His voice fades like a hiss.

I wake up. My head jumbles with random thoughts. I yawn after that blissful nap. I check if I had wings on my back. I go to my room carrying my socks like smelly gym socks. I have acquired a photographic memory. I do not bump into the walls or chairs. My motto is the faster you learn something without cutting corners so to speak, then you learn to avoid challenging obstacles. I learn when it comes to electronic always start from its cord then guide my fingers up. If I should iron my shirts, I know not to grab the iron but instead start at the cord. I am grateful for the group that helped blind people learn techniques to cope with our daily lives.

My toes feel nice like walking on cotton candy because of my carpet. I rummage through my dresser. I feel my bra, I buy soft ones because the hard bra’s wire can become loose. It could poke me in the eye or something. I would hate to lose my eyes.

There are no socks in here. I check my basket around my bed. I get frustrated because I couldn’t find any on top of the bucket. I dump the bucket of clothes on my bed. A shirt nope don’t need that, nor am I looking for sweatpants. I think I’m more frustrated because I was taught how to mark my clothes but I don’t follow the strategy as often as I should. The most important knowledge I take to

heart from my association is to have confidence. Confidence leads to a better life. Having faith in myself is a must.

I put on socks. What's this? I'm trying to figure out what this item is in my hands. It has to be Mom's green hat. The same pattern of octagons are array on the sides, it's soft.

Even though I cannot tell I just know these socks are mismatched, I get this feeling of embarrassment. I should just put on my shoes. I put on the first pair I touch. Wait what if this is mixed match? It's enough to make me screech. Sometimes I play it off as a joke but not knowing simple life skills like that massacres my ego.

I stand in front of my big mirror. It's as tall as me. I pose for a moment then do a silly little jive.

I faintly hear the front door shut. Mom's home! I continue dancing and mute singing. I flip my hair with excitement. I like to believe I'm an exceptional dancer. The TV goes off. I wonder why she turns it off so I begin to step out. I feel my soul pulling back the words 'mom is that you?' She would have called for me by now, she would have scream my name over whatever show is on. I stop myself at my door and wait for her call.

I hear the floor squeak coming from the kitchen. I wonder if it is one of my family members stopping by. Again, they would have also called my name. We have a system. This feeling that is swelling... My heart dives with worry and floats with fear. The tips of my fingers are wet. I hear movement around the apartment. The steps are tentative but determined. I cannot tell if it's male or female. The clatter of dishes chokes me with a petrifying thought, IT'S DEFINITELY NOT MOM!

The footsteps grow farther away. I cannot calm myself. My heart's pounding. Calm down. Calm down. The person that broke in hasn't said anything. My bedroom door is partially open. Do I close it or leave it like it is? If I should make a mistake they might overhear.

Since I cannot hear the stranger's footsteps that means they are walking on the carpet, which only means one thing they are getting closer to my room. I forget about the door and crawl under my bed. God, please, please help me. My bed sheets hang off the sides like bangs so I'm concealed. I hear mom's door closing

after they spent some time in there. My door squeaks like a trapped rodent. I bite my lips.

Where are they?

I cannot inhale through my nose correctly, I jerk my head to the right after hearing the squeaky toy go off. I didn't hear a thing I thought they stood still the whole time. Knowing my room, I can visualize where they are standing. I scrape to my left. I gulp with utter despair. "Bzz, Bzzz, Bzzz" Now or never... my heart pounds. Now or never? If I stay under here maybe they will leave.

I experience an asthma-like attack. I scoot to the back like my life depended on it. The atmosphere is indescribable. His phone goes off again. After the third ring, he answers this time. "Do you have her?"

The person in the room does not talk back. The defeating sound is close to me. My stomach drops and I hide my face inside Mom hat. There is a swelling in the back of my throat.

I freeze in glacier-like fear, contemplating on running. I'm a lot closer to my door than he is. I can make it.

What's that, my heart pounding? NO. It's breathing, I can't just stay. I push through. Immovable objects meet my unstoppable force. Stupidly I decide to run. The stranger is silent.

For a brief second I could make a life-altering decision. Head for the outside door would be the safest bet. I see the table in my head. Wait, is this smart? What if I hide in Mom's room? I could lock the doors, that would be faster; maybe safer? I have plenty of time. Or should I run for the door! I could go outside and yell for help. But will I be fast enough?

This decision is impossible. I...I... I should lock myself in Mom's room, my chest is breathing. I...I...I should run for the door and call for help. Her room is a lot closer. What if he just breaks down her door? Door...Her room. Door....door... no lock myself in. Run...lock, call for help, Mom's room. Door, door? No wait

"Run! Syble" I hear this powerful whisper in my head, one that was not my own. I grab something then I dart for the door. The strangers breathing is ferocious. "Come here" he knocks me over. I get up. I kick in his direction with

all my might. I run again. He shoves me this time causing me to fall.

I start to scoot for the door. His shoes are between my legs. His fingers are touching my left arm crawling up both shoulders. He squeezes with intent of not letting go. I break my right arm free. I'm just about pulling my left out its socket. I pull closer to the center of the couch. His fingers then grab me by the chin "Stop" is all he said. I stop for a second and he eases up. I smash the glass cup on his head. His painful grunts are my proof as he releases my other arm. It falls out my hand. I couldn't pick myself up so I crawl towards the noise. A sharp pain strikes my palm while crawling. "Ahhh"

I dust off fear and pick myself up. The door. I crack it open.

Black:

Part 6

We have been driving for a lengthy time.

My head is bruised.

The vehicle is still moving, I cannot remember what happened.

The car makes a sharp turn, and I bump into a body. A series of questions stack in my head like Jenga until one final question makes me collapse. What are they going to do to me?

The car stops. I jump out of a truck. "Take off her blindfold. But only the one in front, the one leading." I'm not leading.

"Grab on to her. Now walk." I'm pushed forward by a sticklike prod. "Grab on to her." His voice is raspy. Twigs on the ground crunch with each step I take. The person in front of me that I grab onto has wide hips. We move. Where are they taking us?

The shuffling of our feet is endless as the smell of dust fills my nostrils. My head frantically moves every time someone talks. The sound of rustling leaves and gravel doesn't sound familiar.

Fear grips my thoughts. I trip over small vines on the pathway. The bird chirps are eerie from above. "Pick up your feet." There are two male voices to the left and right of me. I want to run but my legs are filled with despair. I stumble again. The girl directly behind me starts fumbling. My shoes keep tripping on roots. The girl behind me tumbles and tries to take me with her. I use the woman in front as a wall to keep myself from plunging to the ground. "You two keep up." Are there more of us? Somebody finally topples over. "Take off the bags and blindfolds."

We begin to move uphill. I want to ask them where we are going but cannot find a voice, is it even appropriate? Would they hurt me if I do?

"Where are we going?" The lady in front of me says. I release this squeeze my finger has on her hips. She feels my tension. We come to a stop.

I hear them calling out numbers. A hand pats my head. “Three, four....seven.” Is he taking roll call? “Get against the wall” says the man with a raspy voice. He continues. “When are the others coming? We cannot stay in this cabin for too long.” I stop moving when I hear the door shutting. Everyone is quiet. I’m going to die is all that is in my head. They will hurt you. You’re dying. You’re dead!

“You, why are you standing?” says a familiar deep voice. I keep my head straight. “You!” My heart drops. He’s not talking to me, is he? One of the two strangers is approaching. Anyone could see my body quivering. There is a friendly tug on my jean. She does two quick tugs on my jean. My blood drops. He keeps coming. “Always causing trouble.” I sit down faster than a blink. That was the voice I heard in my room. Before I blacked out. I still cannot remember what happened. He continues to creep toward me.

I stop breathing for a second. It’s like I can feel his fingers digging into my body crushing my heart and lungs.

The door opens. The stranger stops approaching me with vigor intent.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” The lady who help me says after he walks away. My spirit faints with the words she said. That’s not it at all. I didn’t realize a thing. Clueless if I hadn’t remember his voice I hate to think what would happen.

The guy who walks in the door is a loudmouth compared to these two. His voice shows leadership. “Listen up, ladies. No one causes any trouble and we will all get along.”

“It’s about time.” I hear the raspy voice say. The door closes behind them like a power down vacuum. Is it three more murderers? I think after hearing several more footsteps. “These are the last two girls.” He is foreign. A Russian accent. “Bzzz, Bzz” The same phone buzz resonates. “Yeah. Günter just arrived with the last two. Make sure the cargo ship arrives and docks on time. We have to execute the plan or else we might have to go to plan B. Nobody profits.”

“Sit down with the rest you two,” says the raspy voice. I’m shoved to scoot over. Where will they take us and what are they expecting us to do?”

“They gave you any trouble?” the foreign one says, his English is stiff. “Let’s see what we got here.” He stops talking. No one else is saying anything. I can only hear my thoughts battling with every possible outcome.

Each passing second he shuffles his feet. I don't know what's happening. I want to shout loud enough that Mom hears me. "Move," says the foreigner. Should I scoot over? Is he talking to me? I'm not sure. The same friendly tug. I stop. His steps scrapes my ear. The anticipation pumps me with adrenaline.

"I said move," he repeats. "Play nice," he tells a girl. "Suel tame," she grunts, I can hear the girl fighting. Her hands rub against his jacket. "Suel tame," she says again. She has a thick Spanish accent. "Ayuadame, ayuadame, ayuadame!" She whimpers. I hear a smack, one of the disciplinary actions. Then another smack to show superiority. It's like waiting in line as a customer to be served next. Except I don't want to be in this line.

He skips the person before me, his chains rattle. "I do like curly hair." And at that moment when he stops in front of me, it crawls up my ears...

My arms are lifted up by the foreign murderer name Günter. I can feel his cold hands on my shirt. He says, "Move." I lift my arms back up then his hands slip underneath. I did not want to get hit. He pulls on my nipple.

"Sit still and be quiet," Günter says. I pull my hat over my face. Fear, I can taste it, it's taking form, sharp like a disease.

My mouth is abandoned of moisture. Fear becomes real, it's not just a thought, not just a word, it's a new sense. I can hear, I can smell. Taste, touch and with this tangible feeling, I see that fear is a horrid beast.

Günter relays instructions to his people. I can feel this cat like shivering on my arm. The girl next to me is shaking.

"I'm so scared," she squeals out. I didn't know what to say to her. I didn't even want to touch her. I mustn't move. I push her off me. "I'm so scared," she says while releasing my arm.

If I'm feeling like this then..."I'm scared." I hear her, this time I actually hear her. A scared child, probably no older than ten.

I'm listening to a bunch of sniffing around the room, feminine voices breathing frantically. The young girl pulls me closer, her head small against my arm. It's thin like noodles. We sit paralyzed for hours.

"What's your name?" I whisper.

“Sam,” she whimpers. I hug her like she belongs.

About the Author

Franklin Neal was born in Liberia and moved to the states at a young age. Though it was a short time in Liberia, he has grasped the concept of hard work and dedication is crucial. He has always wanted to tell emotional and powerful stories. Rooks of the Raven is his debut novel and he hopes to write many original stories.

Neal plans on creating his own original stories into movies with him directing. Rather its music or books Franklin Neal is always honing his skills as a devoted writer. He loves a great game of chess.

‘Devour the unknown to digest knowledge.’ Check out more of his content at <https://franklinnealauthor.weebly.com/blog>. Neal’s website/blog includes all of his books, inspirational posts, music, and much more.

From the Author

When I first realized I wanted to be an author, an idea springs to my head and guess what it is? A title! Like a newborn baby, it cried out Rooks of the Raven, my debut novel. This unique idea formed a new life and my journey begins. Thank you guys for reading my second book! If I could ask you all to humbly leave a helpful review it would mean the world to me. With your help I can strive to be a better author and leader. As an upcoming self publish author any type of assistance is greatly appreciated. If you are a fan of fantasy stories please stay

tune for my next novel Eden's Origins. Thanks again, and don't forget to share the experience.

Below will be an excerpt from Rooks of the Raven my debut novel.

Bonus Content: Rooks of the Raven Malcolm's Story

"Here you are, Massa." I give him my whole jar of coins that I've saved since I was born. I watch him get my papers out of his thin drawer. His seal is on the right side of his desk, a small little thing that holds so much worth. His hands hover over the pages. My throat gets tight, waiting for him to press down. I watch him struggle to press down on the paper. I hold my breath with the agonizing pain wondering will I make it. When can I exhale? My heart swims with excitement. Free!

"How are you feeling my boy?" he asks with an honest gaze.

"Great sir, like a new man."

"Well, you should be. I suppose you can address me as Dante if it pleases you." Our firm handshake feels like he wants to hold me for another decade. "You were one of my best. I've known you since we were young, huh?"

As I see him now, it's an old friend in front of me, not an owner that needs his ego stroked. He is nothing like his father.

"Thank you for keeping your word, Dante. Since I'm a slave I hold no property, so if you really wanted to... well anyway, thanks for showing me there are still hope for my people. One day maybe they too will taste freedom."

I say my goodbye to everyone. No longer than a Sunday prayer.

I have to thank Abel from the top of my heart, the same exact heart that still beats till this day after enduring twenty slave years. Since birth, I was here. The air smells different, like it's not choking me any longer. My whole body tingles with an unpleasant but gentle feeling of what now.

The fights I was involved in, the beat down they had me endure, the thought of taking my own life. I fought all that. This is the right path for me to leave a lasting stand.

"Thank you. I learned so much. By the time you hear from me, hopefully all is great." Her eyes have changed drastically from the first day she came here, a scared child grown into an independent woman Abel is tough. Not much taller than a baby tree.

"Goodbye everyone." I take off with a small amount of change in my pocket and a sack containing my papers and head to enlist. Where am I going? I have no idea but will figure that out soon.

On the road, I see a couple of white men in a carriage. Keep it cool, head down and mind yourself. I may be free but to everyone else I look like a slave. I have to act the part of a free man.

When they draw near, we pass one another without a scare until I feel the horses' hot breath behind my neck.

"Boy. Hey boy!" I keep walking like a deaf man. I don't hear nothing. "He must be deaf."

Fools.

"Look at what this nigger thinks he wearing. Where you get that blue vest and trousers? That boy thinks he is pretty like a flower."

"I guess he can hear us after all." I turn to look at them. Both are dressed like they are attending Dante's party. The man who asked if I was deaf has a pocket watch dangling. "You lost, boy?"

"No." I stop myself before I call him Massa. "No, not lost. I have important matters to attend. I will be gone now, you gentlemen have a splendid day."

“You hear this nigger, important matters.” His partner says, “What important matters do niggers have but cleaning our coops and attending to our bidding? Heck, I reckon you escaped, huh boy?”

Stay calm you are a free man, you have every right to be out here. I reach in my bag.

“Woah.” They scream as if hit with an unexpected whip. Both men have their fingers at their hips.

“Gentlemen, sorry for the confusion. No disrespect, just reaching for my papers.” I take a swallow, choking on my own saliva.

The incoming breeze almost folded my paper. “Here, here take a look. I did not run. Proof. Paid fully.”

“Why you shaking?” The one with the rugged beard asks. They hand me back my freedom.

“I will be off now.”

“We don’t think so. See we don’t care if you have these papers. We cannot allow you to think you’re equal to us, now can we?”

“I don’t think we can, Adam.”

“Wait we can sell him back. He is a fine buck and will make us money.”

I’m in the back of their wagon once more tasting ropes around my arms and legs.

It’s getting dark and they set up camp. The wind is bitter to the touch. They start a fire with matches, feeding me their leftovers after they ate. The two white men sleep by the fire with bags and blankets devouring the fire warmth. I am tied in the cold, near enough to lick the warmth of the fire’s glow.

“No funny business now,” Adam says.

I hear them making loud noises in their sleep. Reach. My heart jumps with every grunt. I reach in my bag and take out my knife, quietly cutting the rope.

It took a while because I did not want to take any chances. I have a choice to make.

I go where they are sleeping. “I see you are warm and comfortable probably having a good dream, whipping more niggers huh, boys? What else you thinking about in that disgusting mind? How many of my people you hung or shot? Maybe you’re the kind to starve them, is that it?” I take the knife by its neck, grip it with hate, and then proceed. “Who’s the idiot now?”

I take their horses. I found me a nice spot to camp for the night.

In the morning, I’m not sure where I’m at the moment but I don’t stop. I’m off a trail, not exactly in the forest but its grassy area. It’s harder to control the horses than I imagined.

More of them. “Morning.” I put on a smile that appears like I’m one of them.

“Morning.” No troubles this time. Must be the new hat I acquired. An urge to laugh surfaces.

“Wait, wait! Might I trouble you, what month be this?”

The women speak to me in a low-pitched voice, polite to the fullest. “May, sir.”

“Never mind me. Have a wonderful day.” I respond.

I tip my hat, showing my gratitude. “Keep heading south like you are now and best believe you in South Carolina,” the gentleman at last says as we pass one another.

I extend my gratitude once more. There I have it. I know the month and where I’m going. All I’m missing is a partner.

Let’s see what those nice white men have in the back. I see some canteens of water, a flask I believe, cold to the touch. Ohh strong stuff. I don’t know any drink names so I’ll call it good water with a side of a mule kick. Actually, mule kick ought to be its name. Also, I found some biscuits that I put down real fast. Eh, crusty. No flavor whatsoever.

The sun is going down. I suppose I should let these horses rest, drink, and eat up. It’s a good feeling being out and about on my own, stretching my wings.

The night is dark and I can hear crickets fussing about. The cool night breeze grazes my skin like prickly grass. I stare at the moon that looks like someone bit into it. I’m wrapped in a blanket. I take a breather.

I see what looks like a dark figure running through the wood.

“Sir, please help me!”

A tall, scrawny boy comes up to me, like he hasn’t eaten anything in days, an image of a runaway. His worn-out pants have an overall strap hanging broken from his shoulder.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Yous free man, sir? Out and about like this? And it be Mo.” “Now your name wouldn’t be short for Moses would it?”

He shakes his head. “No sir, Montana Relic.” Montana smells like he dove in a swamp.

“Oh, well, have a good day then. I best be off.”

He starts shaking. “Sir, sir please I’ve run for days now. Let me come.”

Montana tells me he was running to join the Union forces as well. “Malcolm yous weren’t ‘bout to leave me back there?”

“No Mo, I had no ill intention,” I tell him to go back and find himself something to eat. “Hey Mo, you see them blankets?”

“Yes sir, why?”

“I need you to hide under it for now. Don’t make any sounds.”

A white man comes up at me. He looks like a slave catcher. “How can I help you today?” I speak with confidence this time. It’s not just my life is at risk.

“Where you heading boy?”

I hop off the wagon to meet him. “South Carolina.”

“May I see your papers? I reckon you not having any ideas of joining the armed forces. Everything seems adequate. Here are your documents. May I check in the back looking for run-aways. Does that bother you son?”

I take a brief pause. “No sir. Go right on, I hear they tend to be slippery people.” I smile.

He circles the horses then heads toward the back. He moves some materials around. I draw closer. I ask with a slave tone instead of a free man. "Everything in order sir?" My head and brows are moist. The white man plays around searching. He lifts the blanket up.

"What do we have here, a-" He looks at me. I swing my knife and he raises his pistol. "Malcolm. Malcolm!" The ill child called. "Hang."

My chest is pounding. My blood gushes. I fade in and out. Above me is his square face. His bony chin. "Malcolm?" It's nearly dark when I come to. The boy somehow helped me. I still feel pain.

"Mo, listen to me there something I have to say."

"Rook what that be?" He asks.

"The strength to carry on, remember that well." The boy is filled with many curious questions. If he hadn't seen that I'm free he never would have believed such thoughts could ever be a reality. I lay up breathing hard. Fascination stains his colored face and questions spill out of his ashy mouth. "You sure you want to join?" I ask.

"No. I only ran away because my mother was sold. I thought I could find her. I think its best I fight for Mama's freedom if she alive. Pa passed long ago before I was born. Massa had to show us who in charge. Best believe Papa was hung. Mama don't say much. I swore I never tell my story."

"Those burn marks, how that happen?" He ask me.

I clear my throat. My mouth is dry. "I'm here to atone. My body is proof of hell. My Massa, long before Dante the one I bought my freedom from. His father was in charge, a harsh man. Teeth sharper than Satan's horn his bite even worse. Hung the many of us best believe that. In that bunch my Pa drew on it. I know you remember the sight. Their legs dangling. You look at them wishing you could cut them down. How long did your old man stay up there? No, don't answer.

"I felt anger, sorrow, hate, and more much more. They cast me into the shadows at a young age. My poor beautiful mother was sold since she couldn't work anymore after her love died. With nothing to lose, I took a plunge for me freedom like most would, no future to my left, no past to my right. I stared in the

reaper's eyes."

"I ran from my Massa's home, only to get caught and sold to another, the Butlers. I must have been in my twenties but I...I felt like my life been tied with a dark knot that never will be undone. Best believe my mind was filled with rage. I wanted them to pay, all and any whites. Don't care who it be. But I choose another way. When I caught eyes on the mistress, one thought came to mind.

"So I became crafty like them, timed the world around me, learned they schedule and business, where they be going whens theys gone, all that. Just waited as my heart sank lower. They want to beat me, I welcome that, tell them add another ten lashes! They want to chop off my left leg, I ask what about the right?

"One day the mistress usually checks on her stable, polish her precious horses. I knew nobody around. Made an excuse to lower her guard, 'mistress, I seen you ride, real fancy with it.' You know, pretty her up a bit. Then I grab her.

"Several months later. The mistress ashamed or maybe scared. She did not say anything until the truth birthed its way out. The foolish Massa thought it be his kid in that belly. I didn't know either. I still remember his face, oh, he turn red real quick like. Embarrassment, anger, grief. I welcome him to feel all that! Give them a day of hell. I endure a lifetime of it! We all did! What he felt is nothing like how I feel! You can't fill a lake with pebbles, now can you? They just march all about and...and. I suppose they didn't deserve that but do I care? When have they ever cared?

"Well anyways, the night of my slumber, he bolted my doors shut with the child in there and myself. I didn't know the child was in there. I tried to break free but the flames became hotter. I did the unspeakable. I got out myself, don't know what became of that baby. My face and wrist are just the parts you see."

I lift my shirt. The scars wrap thickly above my chest. "I left that poor child in there and ran. I was captured and returned to the Meade's plantation."

"You best not be telling me you joining to have yourself killed? Tell me." The young boy stood up of the log. His fist clenched. He is concern for my life.

"Hmph settle down Mo. At first it was, but I have people that I am fighting for my new family."

I walk not too far off. He opens his mouth. "Those two men you mention earlier the ones that stopped you. Did you kill em?"

"Look, it's late. Get some sleep. Hopefully, we make it 'cause this be our last fire. I'm going to get some more wood for the fire, keep it alive."

They call us the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, one of the first official African-American units. My commander is Robert Gould Shaw. We march through the streets men, women, and children of the other race admiring us. Blacks in blue, what a sight! It brings me back to training day.

Sergeant hollers for us to get in line. Wet slush, dry ground it didn't matter. We train no matter the condition.

Quickly we learn how to aim and reload faster. Organization is the key and they emphasize not to break our ranks. "Stand tall soldier." Camped out in tents, five soldiers sleep in the same area. They woke us up earlier than I had imagined. There is constant running, constant yelling. Obedience is key and we are strong with those sets of skills. The boy was a strong one; they built him up real quick and myself as well. Food is scarce. I sit around the fire wondering what is the difference between war and what we all participated in before coming here.

Before things get too serious, I want to write a letter. I pray it makes its way home, and hopefully I do as well. Commander promised he get it deliver. I have complete faith in this honest man and that he will follow up on my request.

I feel such respect when we walk through a tunnel of white soldiers. They give their stamp of approval, roaring in amazement!

"This be it, Montana. No turning back now."

He turns back at me. "No sir, can't you hear them cheering? It be my first time the white men yell with praise. Feels different, you know? When was the last time you heard this? I've been ready since I decides to hop on that wagon way back! I've been ready since my mama sing her last song! Know something Malcolm. I know you ain't kill those two men."

"How you figure?"

His head cocked forward. "I ain't as dumb as people think."

Malcolm saying each name of his family on the plantation. Josephine, Mary Ann, Aunty, Bo, oh Cliff..." They charge for battle with promise.

Acknowledgment

Asking for help is one of the hardest obstacles I find myself tumbling over. I like to show my gratitude towards the people who lend a hand when I needed it the most. This story would not be possible if it wasn't for my launch team. Love those guys. I want to thank Self-Publishing School for assisting me with my second book. SPS answer questions that lead to my accomplishments. A special thanks to Qiarra Stamps for assisting me through the rough phases of writing and bringing a new perspective to Six Years Black. Thank you to everyone that read the book.